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The Making and Unraveling of a Civilized Nation

Perhaps no president is more affiliated with the notion of race as Theodore Roosevelt. In his book *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century,* historian Gary Gerstle juxtaposes the terms civic nationalism and racial nationalism to describe the American nation in the twentieth century. Gerstle designates racial nationalism within the American nation as an ideal that places Africans, Asians, nonwhite Latin Americans, and later, southern and eastern Europeans, into a second tier below “premium” white Europeans (Gerstle, 5). Gerstle describes civic nationalism as the collection of beliefs that represent a kind of democratic universalism, an idea in which the United States has been transformed by the belief in the fundamental equality of all human beings (Gerstle, 4). Gerstle’s thesis is that the pursuit of these two powerful and contradictory ideals has “decisively shaped the history of the American nation in the twentieth century” (Gerstle, 5). Gerstle sets out to show how civic and racial nationalism influenced immigration and war policies, shaped social reform movements and civil rights, and animated the nation’s communal imagination (Ibid). In a well-written chronological account of the Rooseveltian nation, Gerstle succeeds in informing his readers how the civic and the racial forms of nationalism influenced America, particularly how America was conceived of by many in ethnoracial terms.

Gerstle’s story begins around 1890 and ends with the death of the Rooseveltian nation in 1980. Within that time frame, America was many things to many people. In the words of Malcolm X, “America was not a dream; it was a nightmare” (Ibid). Gerstle’s inclusion of this quote is intriguing because he claims that liberal presidents, who were racially tolerant, like Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, and Lyndon Johnson, were the most influential architects of the twentieth-century nation (Ibid). Gerstle’s challenge is to prove how these supposedly racially tolerant presidents oversaw policies that infringed on the ideas of **civic nationalism**. The value in a book like this is Gerstle’s evidence that these significant American presidents did indeed have racial tendencies embedded within their policies. By focusing on the contradictions in both Teddy Roosevelt’s racial hybridity and FDR’s “melting pot,” Gerstle successfully demonstrates that both civic and racial nationalism were apart of each Roosevelt’s presidency.

Gerstle’s second major success is his evidence that the plethora of racial violence and racial policies during Vietnam and the civil rights movement destroyed the Rooseveltian nation. In Gerstle’s words, “In the 1960s, the Rooseveltian nation fell apart” (Gerstle, 9). Caught in the grip of racism and violence, America’s civic nationalism deteriorated as African Americans were increasingly treated as second-class citizens in the South. While this is not new or an overly enlightening revelation about American history, Gerstle’s treatment of the time period is unique due to his focus on civic ideals.

*American Crucible* is written chronologically and contains eight chapters. Each chapter focuses on a major topic in American history, which has relevance to civic and racial nationalism. Some of those topics include the Spanish-American War, World War II, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Gerstle emphasizes the role played by prominent American presidents like the Roosevelt’s, Johnson, Reagan, and even Clinton. His use of both primary and secondary sources is impressive, especially the pictures and political cartoons littered throughout the book that contribute to the readers understanding of issues like immigration. One exemplary example is the 1924 “I Am the Undesirable Immigrant” cartoon, a comic strip that satirizes America’s dread of eastern and southern European immigrants (Gerstle, 106). A later picture of six male white soldiers from World War II highlights the powerful sense of Euro-American male fraternity, a key theme in Gerstle’s book (Gerstle, 234). In his epilogue, Gerstle contends that whiteness and blackness are still words charged with meaning, and in this uncertain racial climate, America can no longer appeal to the major traditions of exclusion, like anticommunism, to guide nation-building efforts (Gerstle, 371). Thus, a pivotal question Gerstle leaves the reader with if where race fits into twenty-first American history. An interesting possibility Gerstle proposes is that nationalism will eventually lose its luster because a strong nationalist sentiment has historically been grounded in racial terms, a problem because America has become so multicultural (Gerstle, 373).